

Washington: A Steadier Administration

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, June 27 — The Johnson Administration is a little steadier, a little more confident, and a little stronger politically as a result of its handling of the Middle Eastern

There are several reasons for this. The U.S. military estimates of Israel's capacity to deal with the Arab armies were remarkably accurate. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff actually gave President Johnson an even more pessimistic prediction of what would happen on the battlefield than the Israeli intelligence gave President Eshkol.

In fact, the Joint Chiefs were convinced — as the Israeli Cabinet was not — that Israel would win in a few days even if the Arabs made the first major strike from the air. Whether or not this prediction was justified, the truth is that Mr. Johnson was left with enhanced confidence in his military advice.

The Political Advice

Second, while there was a lot of hesitation about whether and where to meet Mr. Kosygin, Mr. Johnson's political advisers finally came around to a unanimous conclusion that he should, and their estimates of what the Soviet leader would say and do

proved to be highly reliable.

Third, the President himself apparently handled the talks with considerable patience, skill and grace, and this has undoubtedly added to his own sense of assurance. He knew that the Russians had criticized President Eisenhower for always turning to John Foster Dulles at critical moments in the 1955 summit meeting. So he insisted that nobody else be present except the two leaders and their interpreters. He knew also that President Kennedy had allowed the last summit meeting with Khrushchev in 1961 to develop into a shouting match, so he turned the conversation away whenever there was the slightest drift toward threats or intimidation.

Finally, the President managed to make clear to Mr. Kosygin what he would and would not do in Vietnam and the Middle East, and while he did not move the chairman one millimeter off the rigid line laid down in Moscow, he left the Soviets some room for maneuver and undoubtedly improved the Johnson caricature in Kosygin's mind.

We will see later on whether this has any influence on Mr. Kosygin. He is a plain and practical man. He knows probably better than anybody else in the Council of Deputies how far his

country has to travel to transform itself into a modern society, and his few glimpses of the power, energy, and progress of the United States cannot have left him with many of the old Khrushchev illusions about Soviet technical superiority.

Who's in Charge?

The question is whether he is or can become the decisive voice in the Kremlin. The contrast between his personal affability and his political rigidity was striking. Certainly, he said nothing to indicate that he was putting the economic development of his own country ahead of the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or even Cuba.

In the private meetings with the President, and in a long talk with Secretary of Defense McNamara at lunch, it was suggested to Mr. Kosygin that another round of the cold war, another upward lunge of the arms race, an expensive and probably useless competition in antiballistic missiles, and a return to the belligerent status quo in the Middle East was an odd kind of "peaceful coexistence." And he came back, of course, not without some logic, to the idea that Vietnam was not a very good way to build peace and prosperity either.

Nevertheless, even if all this

makes no impression in Moscow, it has made some impression here. Mr. Johnson is, of course, still muttering darkly about the "cussers and doubters" who keep complaining about Vietnam, but he has not come back here with much enthusiasm for sending those extra 100,000 men to Saigon. In fact, he seems more eager to avoid keeping his promise to give General Westmoreland what the general wants than to keep it.

The Popular Reaction

Also, the reaction here and in the country to the President's cautious policy in the Middle East and his steady and patient demeanor with Kosygin may very well have made the President question his assumption that the country is ~~hell bent~~ for tougher policies.

He moved at the start of the Middle Eastern crisis to renew his old friendly association with Senator Fulbright. He expressed to Kosygin his good impressions of the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, and Kosygin, in turn, spoke warmly of his confidence in the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson.

There, of course, are the merest straws. All the ugly facts remain, but the mood is better and the Administration's feeling about itself is undoubtedly improved.